CONCEPTUAL RELATIVISM AND RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

by Gilbert Fulmer

I

Some contemporary philosophers contend that linguistic discourse is divided into numerous logically discrete conceptual schemes. It is said that the statements we make fall into various categories, such as science, religion, ethics, etc.; very strong claims have been made about the logical isolation of these schemes from one another. They are said to be logically discrete, in the sense that it is impossible for an argument in any one category to criticize, evaluate, or refute a statement in any other; such an argument, the contention is, would of course be based on the presuppositions of its *own* scheme. Each conceptual scheme is thus marked off by boundaries which cannot be crossed by argument. For example, it is said that religious statements have a logic of their own, and that it makes no sense to suppose that they can be evaluated by the criteria of another category, such as science. Conceptual schemes are therefore said to be immune to outside criticism.

I will call this view "conceptual relativism," following Kai Nielsen.[1] And I will use the term "conceptual scheme" in the same sense as do the philosophers I am discussing. Others have used this term in other ways; some, for example, speak of schemes that encompass the whole of a person's or a society's thought and speech, and that can be transcended or escaped only with the greatest difficulty, or not at all. But I am concerned here solely with the use I will discuss.

Conceptual relativism is often supposed to follow from the later work of Wittgenstein, with its emphasis on the role of "language-games" in human life. I believe Wittgenstein's work does not require such a reading, and that his position by no means commits him to conceptual relativism; but I will not argue these points here. Instead, I will try to show that there is a fundamental mistake in the claim that any argument which cuts across the boundaries of these schemes must for that reason be invalid.

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If this claim were correct, there would be far-reaching consequences, as indeed its exponents recognize. It would never be possible to discover fundamental incoherence at the center of a conceptual scheme; if the schemes are discrete, no fundamental criticism of any one can be coherent. This thesis has been used to support relativism of various sorts: for example the claim that there could be radically different methods of counting and calculating,[2] and that primitive magic may be logically defensible.[3] But I will confine my discussion to religious language.

Conceptual relativism is clearly an important notion, but is it correct? I will argue that it is not; but first I will cite several examples, in order to make clear exactly what I am criticizing. If I am correct my argument will defend a large class of philosophical arguments from the charge of *a priori* invalidity. I believe that it is impossible to reject arguments wholesale, so to speak, just because they cut across conceptual boundaries. It is only useful to speak of two distinct conceptual schemes as a description of what we have discovered through argument; this notion cannot limit the applicability of arguments in advance.

II

First I will discuss an argument offered by Alasdair MacIntyre in "The Logical Status of Religious Belief."[4] MacIntyre tries to show that certain historical claims to which the Christian is committed could not be refuted by *any conceivable* historical evidence. This is because the Christian has chosen the presuppositions on which he bases his beliefs; and in *his* system nothing can be accepted as counting against these basic beliefs. For example, Christians believe that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified in Jerusalem; this is said to be a matter of ordinary historical fact, as well as a belief of great religious importance. If it were somehow to be proved that Jesus never existed, the beliefs of most Christians would be radically altered.

MacIntyre argues that these historical claims could not be refuted; and no matter what discoveries were made by historians, the Christian could never be forced to abandon his belief. Any evidence which appeared to count against it could simply be discounted by the Christian. For he will accept as relevant only the Bible and Christian teaching. MacIntyre says:

> What I want to suggest is that everything of importance to religious faith is outside the reach of historical investigation. That, for instance, in asking whether the Resurrection happened we are not in fact asking a question which future historical investigation might settle is apparent if we consider how any evidence that might be discovered would be assessed . . . the essence of the New Testament claim, as we have seen, is that certain past events can be part of a religious belief, that is that they can be believed in on authority.[5]

Now, MacIntyre insists that the Christian is being perfectly rational in so rejecting evidence; it is not just that he is psychologically unable to face

unwelcome facts. MacIntyre says, "Every field is defined by reference to certain ultimate criteria. That they are ultimate precludes going beyond them."[6] Thus the Christian is free to choose what he will accept as counting for or against statements about events in the past; he chooses the Bible as his ultimate authority, and he may rightly dismiss anything that conflicts with it. Justification of religious beliefs is possible only by appeal to the defining authority of the religion, and criticism likewise. No outside considerations are relevant, even in evaluating factual assertions like that about Jesus' crucifixion. Acceptance of the New Testament as the authority for statements about historical events is logically fundamental for the Christian, and hence unassailable: no argument from any other system can count against it.

III

W. D. Hudson offers a similar view of the isolation of religious discourse from other forms of language. He says:

> like any other conceptual scheme, a religion is based logically upon presuppositions, and is bounded logically by frontiers; the former must be accepted, and the latter respected, if the game is to be played or the form of life taken up. In the case of theism, we must decide whether or not to deal in questions and answers which have to do with God. This decision is logically like deciding whether or not to do science, think morally, or take up some branch of mathematics. It is the decision to give or not give, a certain frame to experience.[7]

Here again we see the claim that whatever religionists choose to say is, so to speak, logically their own affair. For anyone to challenge them would be to deny their presuppositions, which would of course be merely to counter one set of presuppositions with another. Naturally no argument can show one set of consistent premises more valid than any other. So Hudson concludes that we cannot evaluate religious discourse as a whole, either to justify or discredit it. "It would seem that it is an illusion to think that philosophy can do more than reveal its presupposition and draw its logical frontiers. That presupposition is God and those frontiers mark off talk about God from other kinds of talk."[8] Hudson cheerfully accepts the conclusion this view entails: evaluation of conceptual schemes is logically impossible; they can only be described.

IV

A similar theme is developed by D. Z. Phillips.[9] Many contemporary philosophers, says Phillips, have mistaken the nature of religious propositions. They have asked the general question whether claims to have experienced God can ever provide evidence of God's existence; it would be more appropriate, he thinks, to inquire about the validity of particular claims of religious experience. For the criteria of validity in particular cases involve such things as the doctrine of the Church, and the role of the experience in the believer's life; but these are criteria *within* religious language. These criteria can be applied as a

part of that discourse, but it makes no sense to ask for a general justification of them. Phillips says, "My difficulty is in finding any meaning in this philosophical request for a *general* justification."[10]

What must be realized, he thinks, is that religious statements have meaning within a form of life, and not outside it; it is possible to describe the role they play in this form of life, but not to criticize the form of life as a whole. There is no neutral ground on which to stand to evaluate religious beliefs, or any others; their significance comes from the linguistic context where they are found.

V

A central tenet of the relativism I am discussing is that criticism cannot cut across the boundaries of conceptual schemes, because the criteria of truth, rationality, etc., are grounded in their respective schemes. Thus each scheme has its own internal criteria, which may not be criticized by any other. G. E. Hughes adopts this position in his review of *Religious Belief,* by C. B. Martin.[11] Martin claims that religious statements are in fundamental disarray; there are inconsistencies and incoherences built into the very central concepts which cannot be expunged, but only concealed or ignored. Children are taught the language of religious belief with evasion and obscurity present from the beginning, charges Martin, and these cannot be eliminated later on.

Hughes does not agree; he believes that these statements are in perfectly good order at rock bottom. Mistakes can occur, of course, in religious language, but they are no more necessary or central than in other areas of discourse. Against Martin's charge that religious language is conceptually confused, Hughes asks,

> what are our criteria here for conceptual confusion? I should guess that it is possible to show *any* category of statements or expressions to be conceptually confused if one is allowed to insist that they must conform to the logic of some other category or categories of statements or expressions if they are to be said to make sense.[12]

Hughes proposes an "alternative programme" for meta-theology:

> it consists in allowing the actual use of religious terms and statements to determine their logic, rather than trying to force an alien logic upon them. If we adopt this basis, we can then regard arguments which show how religious statements generate contradictions when they are construed on the model of other types of statements, not as demonstrating that they are conceptually confused, but as showing by contrast some of the peculiarities of their own logic.[13]

Each conceptual scheme, then, has its own "logic," which governs the propriety of statements made within it. Thus statements in the language of religious belief are logical or illogical, true or false, according to the criteria

of logic and truth which operate within that language. Even if some such statements were shown to violate the criteria of rationality or truth of some other scheme, this would be of no consequence. The most that one can do from outside such a self-sufficient conceptual scheme is to map its structure so as to show just what the rules may be that govern it. Hughes says,

> the actual usage of religious terms within religious language is taken as normative for the logical type and the kind of meaning they have. . . . religious language is a long-established *fait accompli*, and something which does a job which, as far as I have been able to discover, no other segment of language can do.[14]

This "alternative programme" is a perfect example of conceptual relativism. Religious language, according to Hughes, cannot be criticized from without, for that would involve "forcing an alien logic" upon it. The boundaries between conceptual schemes, then, are logically impenetrable: no arguments can cross them.

VI

These "schemes" have several interesting characteristics:

a) There are many distinct conceptual schemes, e.g., science, religion, and morality.

b) The presuppositions, rules of inference, criteria of rationality, etc., of each scheme are the only ones relevant to it; no others can count.

c) The criteria, rules, etc., for a scheme may be chosen at will; i.e., a scheme may be constructed in any fashion, as long as it is internally consistent.

d) One is free to choose in which schemes to participate and which not; e.g., whether to do science or religion; and one can participate successively in any number, so long as he respects the rules of each while engaging in it.

When these characteristics are listed in this way, a clear analogy emerges between the relativists' conceptual schemes and the formal deductive systems of mathematical logic. Like an uninterpreted calculus, each scheme is logically isolated from all others. No scheme can be criticized or evaluated by arguments based in different schemes. There can be as many schemes as one cares to construct. Moreover, the relativists say we are free to select any consistent set of premises we choose in constructing a scheme, and to apply any rules of inference we like. The Christian is free, Hudson says, to choose God as his presupposition, and to draw whatever conclusions follow within *his* system. And MacIntyre claims the Christian can dismiss evidence which others would think counted against his belief, for he can select his rules of inference at will.

Insofar as the schemes can be shown to exhibit the characteristics attributed to them, the analogy with deductive systems may be enlightening: if it should turn out on examination that the schemes do function in this fashion, this would be of great interest. But nothing has been said to establish that they do

so function; therefore no inferences should be drawn from the supposed analogy. In particular, we should not assume that any argument which "crosses conceptual boundaries" is automatically invalid, or that whatever is said within any scheme is necessarily in conceptual order.

VII

We must try to see whether this notion of discrete conceptual schemes is correct. The relativists tell us that criticism and argument cannot cross conceptual boundaries. Therefore the precise location of these boundaries is, for them, a matter of great importance: knowing to what scheme a locution belongs helps to determine its logical implications. For they believe that it can have none in schemes other than its own.

The method the relativists use to identify the scheme is the source, or context, in which the locution appears. For example, it is widely agreed nowadays that it is a mistake to use *Genesis* to dispute geologists' conclusions about the age of the earth. If one asks such questions, the answers are to be found through the methods of science. And of course it would also be a mistake to argue that *Genesis* is worthless because it is not a reliable source of information about geology. The relativists say that either argument would be invalid *because* it cuts across the conceptual boundary between science and religion.

But the relativists' argument is neatly circular. They say that there are logically discrete conceptual schemes; then they tell us that criticism and argument cannot cross the conceptual boundaries between them. Well, if the schemes and the boundaries are as described, *of course* criticism and argument cannot cross them. For the schemes have been defined as logically discrete. But now it does no good to explain that criticism and argument cannot cross the boundaries *because* the schemes are discrete, for that is simply to repeat the original assumption. To take the source of a remark as conclusive evidence about the scheme to which it belongs is to assume the relativistic conclusion, not to support it. Argument is needed to show that in fact conceptual schemes are logically isolated, and that therefore the criticisms are irrelevant; this argument is never provided.

If we are to conclude that the geologists' assault on *Genesis,* and the fundamentalists' attack on geology, are conceptual blunders, we will have to do more than to note that the first appears in a scientific journal and the second in a tent meeting. That is, we need some other way of showing that there is an important logical difference between what the two are doing, so that the conflict may in some way be resolved.

VIII

The relativists make the location of conceptual boundaries primary: the logical implications of the assertions we make are to be discovered by observing

whether or not they stay within the bounds of their own scheme. But we have just seen that the relativist cannot support his position by taking the source of the locution as identifying the scheme. How, then, are we to learn where the boundaries lie?

The only way, I suggest, is to examine the *use* of the various expressions. In the case of the dispute between geology and *Genesis,* we learned that there was no real conflict by noticing that the assertions of geology have a very different function from those of the Bible. If one is concerned to know the age of the earth, one must look to the methods of natural science, for the logical grammar of propositions about the past determines what sort of evidence is relevant. *Genesis* cannot yield such information. And *Genesis,* too, has its own characteristic uses, which are beyond geological criticism, since they do not involve scientific facts.

We might say, then, that we have discovered a "conceptual boundary" between the language of religion and that of science. But this only means that *Genesis* cannot refute geology, and vice versa. We did not begin with the knowledge that there were two discrete conceptual schemes, and then conclude that *therefore Genesis* has no implications which contradict geology; the boundary between these two schemes just *is* the fact that different types of evidence and argument are relevant to each. Attention to the respective uses reveals the differences between their logical geography; different purposes are involved, and therefore different types of locution are required.

What we learn is not that it is somehow "true"—within fundamentalist Christianity—that the earth is less than six thousand years old, and also "true" —within science—that it is several billion years old. Rather, we learn that what appeared to be statements about factual matters made by the fundamentalist (and what are probably taken by him to be so) cannot intelligibly be interpreted as such, for they do not conform to the logic of stating facts about the past. If we wish to defend the distinctive religious uses of *Genesis,* we should not do so by claiming that two contradictory assertions are both true. Instead, we should recognize that this and many other religious remarks appear to have the form of factual assertions, but are now used according to a wholly different logical pattern.

The relativists believe that conceptual boundaries precede and limit philosophical analysis—that is, that we can know in advance that it is impossible to criticize any scheme according to the criteria of another (Hughes), or to criticize schemes in their entirety (Hudson and Phillips). But if my argument is correct, it is only through the analysis of uses that we discover the boundaries; and therefore it is only through such analysis that we can learn to which "scheme" a given locution belongs. So we cannot deduce anything about the logical implications of a locution from its origin in a particular context: the preacher may engage in putative fact-stating discourse in the pulpit, and scientists may utter remarks which conform to the logic of religious language.

The logical boundaries are in fact discovered through analysis of the use, so those boundaries cannot limit such an analysis.

IX

An illustration is in order. As we have seen, MacIntyre has argued that each conceptual scheme may have its own presuppositions, rules of inference, and so forth. He therefore believes it is logically proper for the Christian to adopt the Bible as his ultimate authority even for historical propositions. Thus, he says, the Christian may dismiss any conceivable evidence which conflicts with his beliefs. If a manuscript were to be discovered in which all the disciples described the methods they had used to cozen and deceive the gullible public, and if the best evidence were to indicate that it was authentic, MacIntyre would still say that it could be dismissed from consideration. For he holds that the Christian takes the Bible as an absolute authority concerning such historical propositions. Let us examine this proposal to accept factual assertions on authority, to see what it could mean.

Suppose we accept the New York *Times* of Sunday, May 18, 1975, as the logically ultimate authority concerning the events it reports. The *Times* is not to be taken as evidence about what happened the previous week, not even as the very best evidence. It is the sole criterion, and nothing whatever can be counted against it. Thus we will accept the *Times* as our logically ultimate presupposition, just as MacIntyre says the Christian adopts the Bible. Does this make sense? I believe not.

If the *Times* says a certain John Smith was killed falling into an excavation on a certain corner, then we must not doubt that he was. If a hundred respectable people swear that they saw him in perfect health after the time of the reported accident, this can make no difference. If there are buildings on all four corners of that intersection, and the newest is twenty years old, this is irrelevant. If Smith himself appears and testifies that he was in no accident, it proves nothing.

Clearly all this is nonsense; it makes a mockery of the concept of the past. Nothing could be more preposterous than saying that a man's own testimony cannot establish that he is alive! And MacIntyre's suggestion that Christians may reject substantial evidence that contradicts their beliefs is equally senseless. It just is not open to us to decide by fiat what is to count as evidence for statements of fact about the past. We can examine the language of past events to learn what should be taken as evidence; but we cannot change that language at will. Documents, including the Bible, can provide reasons or evidence for beliefs about past events; but they cannot be logically ultimate authorities, for they cannot be used as such. We can see now that talk of logically ultimate authorities is out of place here, as is talk of choosing what is to count as evidence. Decisions about what is evidence are not on a footing with the choice

of postulates for a deductive system; what counts as evidence is shown in the language. As Wittgenstein said, "What is a telling ground for something is not anything *I* decide."[15]

X

The relativists suppose that it is possible simply to choose their presuppositions at will, and that no one can gainsay their choice. If they wish to regard the Bible as an ultimate criterion, that is their right, they claim; and they cannot be criticized unless they are inconsistent within their system. They think it makes sense to adopt linguistic rules of their own choosing, *and then to use those rules for whatever purposes they wish,* such as stating facts. But the example shows the sort of nonsense to which this view leads.

The above argument sheds light on the language of past events. It shows something about how the truth about past events is ascertained, and what kinds of things are good reasons for beliefs about the past. It demonstrates that books, including the Bible, can be reasons or evidence for such beliefs, but that it makes no sense to say that any one is a logically ultimate criterion. To hold, as did MacIntyre, that nothing can count against the historical statements in the Bible is to make a conceptual blunder as a result of overlooking the nature of the language of past events. And this blunder is revealed by examination of that language, and of the consequences which follow if we accept MacIntyre's argument. This examination shows that it is not open to us to decide arbitrarily what to call good reasons for believing something about the past. We do not begin with the *a priori* knowledge that religious language and statements about the past are different universes of discourse, and conclude that *therefore* a religious commitment cannot intelligibly be taken as a logically ultimate criterion of truth about the past. Instead, we notice the differences between the two *by* discovering how MacIntyre's supposition leads to absurdity. If we now wish to describe our discovery by saying that these are two distinct conceptual schemes, well and good. But we should not reverse the logical order of these ideas, and suppose that the arguments are invalid *because* they cross boundaries between conceptual schemes.

Premises and rules of inference can be stipulated at will in an uninterpreted calculus precisely because the propositions of such a calculus have no implications beyond itself. But the propositions of Western religions claim factual truth; most Christians believe, as MacIntyre says, that the New Testament account of Jesus' life and death is historically true in just the same way that an account of Caesar's life and death might be. There are rules which must be followed when dealing with factual truth; for example, it is essential to the concept of factual truth that relevant evidence must not be simply dismissed. Such rules are required if the stating of facts is to play the role it does in life and language; it is unintelligible to suppose that facts could be stated while

these rules are ignored. If MacIntyre had concentrated on the various uses of language, he might have seen that it is one thing to hold that there are characteristically religious uses of language, and quite another to declare that they entitle the Christian to assert factual beliefs that are contradicted by the relevant evidence.

So the analogy between conceptual schemes and deductive systems breaks down, and with it the relativists' attempted defense of religious claims. It is nonsensical to say that the Christian may ignore evidence which contradicts his beliefs; if he wishes to make statements of historical fact then he is bound by the rules that govern fact-stating discourse. Otherwise he is simply *not* stating facts. One who insisted in the face of the evidence that John Smith died in that excavation might have his own peculiar purposes, but we could not accept his remarks as a statement of fact. If they have a point, it must be of a very different sort.

We must not suppose, then, that whatever is said by religionists constitutes an isolated conceptual scheme, immune from all criticism; nor is this true of the pronouncements of scientists. If statements about Jesus' life are to function as assertions of historical fact, they must take account of historical evidence. The Christian cannot, therefore, place biblical authority above factual evidence in supporting his assertions. And of course the scientist should recognize that there are important forms of language other than the conveyance of factual information.

XI

The idea of impenetrable logical boundaries between disparate conceptual schemes puts the cart before the horse. Whatever boundaries may lie between modes of discourse can be discovered only by careful examination of individual uses of language to reveal their logical behavior. In speaking of "boundaries" we merely attach a label after the work is done. This is not wrong, but it is philosophically trivial.

When the conceptual relativists state their thesis about the logical disparity of conceptual schemes, it appears that something very profound and important is being said. For it seems that they have discovered a new way of assessing the validity of philosophical arguments, by reference to the conceptual schemes in which they are grounded. But if I am correct the significance of these boundaries is small. For the boundaries exist only insofar as they reflect the relevance and validity of the reasons given for a conclusion. So saying that criticism and argument cannot cross conceptual boundaries just means that criticism and argument are invalid where they are invalid! Nothing very interesting is being said after all.

Conceptual relativism, then, is a mistake. It assumes, without argument, that there are logically isolated schemes. Making this assumption, it supposes

that one can adopt any rules of inference, etc., one wishes within a scheme. But what counts as evidence for factual beliefs is not anything that can be changed at will; it is given in the language. So the short-cut method of dismissing arguments which "cut across boundaries" is of no use, since we must evaluate the arguments to find the boundaries. Speaking of "conceptual schemes" does not help us avoid the hard philosophical spadework of analyzing the various uses of language. And it certainly provides no support for the relativistic thesis that what is factually false in one form of discourse may somehow be true in another.

NOTES

1. Kai Nielsen, *Contemporary Critiques of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1971), chapter 5.

2. E. g., Charles S. Chihara, "Wittgenstein and Logical Compulsion," *Analysis* **21** (1960–61):136–140; reprinted in *Wittgenstein: the Philosophical Investigations,* ed. George Pitcher (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 469–476.

3. Peter Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society," *American Philosophical Quarterly* **1** (1964):307–324. I have criticized Winch's position in a paper, "Reasoning in a Primitive Society," scheduled to appear in *Metaphilosophy* in 1976.

4. In *Metaphysical Beliefs,* ed. Stephen Toulmin (London: SCM Press, 1957).

5. Ibid., pp. 206–207.

6. Ibid., p. 202.

7. W. D. Hudson, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Bearing of his Philosophy Upon Religious Belief* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1968), p. 67.

8. Ibid., pp. 67–68.

9. D. Z. Phillips, "Religion and Epistemology; Some Contemporary Confusions," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* **44** (1966):316–330.

10. Ibid., p. 316.

11. G. E. Hughes, "Critical Notice of *Religious Belief* by C. B. Martin," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* **40** (1962):212–219. C. B. Martin, *Religious Belief* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1959).

12. Hughes, "Critical Notice of *Religious Belief,*" p. 214.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., p. 215.

15. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty,* ed. G. E. M. Anscombe *et. al.* (New York: J. and J. Harper, 1969), section 271; cf. section 317.